THE STRONGEST LINK: THE MANAGEMENT AND PROCESSING OF ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

BY PAM HACKBART-DEAN AND CHRISTINE DE CATANZARO

ABSTRACT: The work of every archives includes selecting, preserving, and making available materials of enduring research value for current and future research use. This effort is done in conjunction with creating processing priorities, identifying space for collections, and locating resources and staffing. Processing plays a crucial role in making collections available to researchers. However, the action of processing cannot take place in isolation. Acquiring collections of quality, planning priorities for processing, determining levels of arrangement and description, establishing standards and procedures for processing, and working with "living" (or continuously growing) collections are fundamentally important for any successful archival program. Ultimately, the planning and management of processing becomes the essential building block for any archives.

One of the greatest challenges confronting archivists today is the significant size of modern archival collections. Despite these challenges, archivists must continue the work of selecting, preserving, and making available materials of enduring research value for current and future research use without preempting processing priorities, space, resources, and staffing. Processing plays a crucial role in making collections available to researchers. But the activity of processing cannot take place in a vacuum. The issues associated with obtaining collections of quality, planning priorities for processing, determining levels of arrangement and description, establishing standards and procedures for processing, and working with "living" (or continuously growing) collections all assume fundamental importance for successful archival management. Thus, the planning and management of processing becomes an essential building block, a strong link in the chain of a successful archival program.

According to the Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators and Records Managers, processing includes the "activities of accessioning, arranging, describing and properly storing archival materials." The management of processing is the big picture of making a collection available for research beyond these nuts and bolts of processing. It
is the actual planning of all intellectual and physical arrangement for the entire archives. The questions that arise in the managing of processing are numerous: What are the best appraisal strategies for obtaining collections of quality? What is the best means of establishing priorities for processing? To what level should collections be processed? How can backlog be minimized, if not altogether eliminated? What are the best standards for processing, and how can these standards be achieved? How can archival teamwork be encouraged? How should "living" collections be handled? Ultimately, how do we provide the best access to these collections?

The existing archival literature rarely addresses issues specifically relating to the management of processing. The manuals and commonly used textbooks offer valuable guidelines to archivists on the basic tasks of processing. They focus largely on practical aspects of arrangement and description rather than on issues related to processing within the context of overall archival management. The familiar principles of processing espoused by the theorists, provenance, original order, and Oliver Wendell Holmes’ five levels of processing form the basis for the fundamentals outlined in this literature. Writings on appraisal and selection do offer some observations on the planning of processing and a few articles on archival management address some issues related to establishing processing goals. Canadian archivists Terry Eastwood and Bob Krawczyk provide brief observations on the problems of working with "living" collections in the context of abandoning the concept of provenance (fonds) in Canadian governmental records. Other valuable journal articles, including those by Megan Floyd Desnoyers, John Dojka, Helen W. Slotkin, and Karen T. Lynch, have focused more specifically on planning issues, but they are now more than 20 years old.

This article focuses on processing management questions, drawing upon the knowledge of the authors’ experiences with processing collections housed at the Georgia State University Library, Georgia State University. Although the solutions described here work well in a university’s special collections department, they are adaptable to any situation where there are materials that remain unprocessed.

Appraisal as a Prologue to Processing

Before archivists can decide on processing priorities, they need to review how their institution has chosen to select and accept collections. "While careful arrangement and expansive description are laudable goals," according to Gregory Hunter, "they are a wasted effort on a collection of no enduring value." Moreover, with the profusion of modern records in a myriad of formats, archivists must regularly review and update their institution’s acquisition policy and appraisal procedures.

When accepting or rejecting a collection, archivists are accustomed to considering appraisal factors such as historical significance, legal and evidential value, informational content, and limited documentation. Yet there are many other factors that enter into “the black box,” as Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young have shown. In considering whether to accept a collection, the practical factors—the costs-of-retention factors, as Boles and Young refer to them—are equally important to consider. Collections need to be evaluated in light of the amount of staff time in processing and preservation work
that will be required, as well as the amount of space required to house the materials. It should go without saying that the records must be complementary to other collections and research resources maintained at the repository.

The review process begins with an evaluation of the acquisition policy, as well as an analysis of the collections currently held by the institution. A review of records in a collection includes information "of a record’s functional characteristics: who made the record and for what purpose; of the information in the record to determine its significance and quality; of the record in the context of parallel or related documentary resources; of the potential uses that are likely to be made of the record and the physical, legal and intellectual limitations on access; and of the cost of preserving the record weighed against the benefit of retaining the information."12

Repositories accepting records are ethically committed to ensuring the processing, rehousing, and basic holdings maintenance of the records. A formal assessment should be made of the institution’s ability to provide secured space and an ongoing environmental monitoring program. The repository should be committed to ensuring that these collections will be cataloged in local catalog systems, as well as in a national database such as the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) or the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) provides RLIN bibliographic records for collections in the custody of repositories unable to contribute national-level cataloging to a national computer database. If time and money permit, placing the finding aids on the Web should be a part of the cataloging process.

If some pieces of the storage and cataloging puzzle are not in place, this presents a great opportunity to seek funding and/or institutional support to acquire the missing elements. Funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historic Publications and Records Commission, some state granting agencies, and some private foundations are available to support such initiatives.

Survey of Unprocessed Collections

Most repositories have a backlog of records waiting to be processed, due in large part to the size and complexity of modern records, combined with inadequate institutional resources. The establishment of arrangement and descriptive priorities will ensure a balanced and coordinated processing program. Fleckner, Hunter, and others have discussed the techniques of completing archival surveys13 in the contexts of a records management program, starting an archives, or surveying materials in a given subject area. Similar survey techniques may be applied to the planning of priorities for processing. With a review of the acquisition policy, archivists can produce a systematic survey of unprocessed collections to determine the processing priorities for the backlog.

Planning the survey is essential. Five basic questions must be answered prior to undertaking such a project, including: Who will coordinate the survey? Who will conduct the survey? How long will the information be gathered? What information will be collected? What will be done with this information?14 When these basic questions are answered, analysis will help archivists determine the processing priorities for their repositories.
A survey form (figure 1) provides the archivist with specific information for each unprocessed collection. Most database software packages allow the configuration of electronic forms. Whether or not a database program is used, a survey form can include certain essential information presented in succinct and logical order. Such information includes the title of each collection; the accession number and/or date received; the location of the collection; a brief history or biography; the volume of the collection (according to some standard of measurement); a brief description of materials; an arrangement scheme (alphabetical, chronological, numerical, or none); inclusive dates of the collection; any restrictions (noting what they are and how they are applied); and the presence or absence of a signed deed of gift.

**Figure 1: Survey Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Call Number (Accession Number-035 field)</th>
<th>L2001-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Statement (245 field)</td>
<td>Textile Workers Union of America Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description (300 field)</td>
<td>Location of collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 linear feet</td>
<td>Alumni Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History Note (545 field)</td>
<td>The United Textile Workers of America was chartered in 1901 and became a founding union of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1937. As part of the CIO, the UTWA was renamed the Textile Workers Organizing Committee, then the Textile Workers Union of America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization/Arrangement (351 field)</td>
<td>Dates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-1975</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deed of Gift</td>
<td>Relevant to collecting policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research value</td>
<td>Preservation priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary Note (520 field)</td>
<td>The collection consists of correspondence, membership rosters, contract proposals, legal and financial documents and industry data. The correspondence is the largest segment of the collection and includes letters between New England and Mid Atlantic local officers and Southern Director Joseph Jacobs. Materials include dues payments; per-capita taxes; defense fun contributions; news for the union newspaper the <em>Textile Challenger</em>; contract negotiation, interpretation, and recognition; grievance settlements; arbitration hearings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information gathered could parallel a MARC21 record. This initial information gathered about each collection would then create a basic catalog record to be entered in a national bibliographic database. The collection may not be processed, but at least researchers can be made aware of its location.

To refine the assessment process, further questions may be added, including: Do the records relate to the institution in terms of topics that are being documented? What is the stated purpose of the collection as it relates to the institution’s mission policy? Who are the institution’s users?
The assessment process includes ranking each collection as a high, moderate, or low preservation priority. Information on the condition and stability of each collection and the preservation options required for each collection, including improvement of housing, reformatting, or conservation treatment, would assist in determining these priorities. Finally, a consideration of any special formats that will need special attention (such as photographs, audiovisual, scrapbooks, electronic records, or artifacts) needs to be noted.

Reviewing the acquisition policy, reference use statistics, and reference questions assists in determining high-priority collections. The value of the material for research purposes and/or its intrinsic value to the institution, to a specific group, or to society in general will help to determine appropriate actions and to set priorities. Those records having high research value and pressing preservation needs assume the highest priority.

When all the preceding information has been gathered for every unprocessed collection, those collections with a high priority can be identified. Action plans for processing can be developed in five-year increments, with a review and update of the survey at the conclusion of this period.

**Preliminary Processing Steps**

In Mary Boccaccio and David W. Carmicheal’s technical manual, *Processing Congressional Collections*, the authors suggest important preliminary steps before beginning to process a collection of any size. Every project should begin with checking the boxes sent against the packing list or against a preliminary inventory prepared by the receiving institution. Since boxes from the collection may be stored in various locations, it is important to make sure all boxes and inventory lists are concurrent. Although this action seems so simple and straightforward, it is important to verify that all materials are available at the beginning to bypass problems later in the processing of the collection.

As repositories receive the papers of an individual or organization, they frequently include formats with special access and preservation challenges such as photographs, audiovisual materials, graphic materials, maps, memorabilia, and electronic records in addition to traditional paper materials. The preliminary inventory can be as simple as a box list with a brief description of the contents of each box. If possible, the inventory will provide information to the box level and include the type of material (format), the organization of records, the broad subject area covered, and the inclusive date span.

Using the preliminary inventory as a basis, the processing archivist creates a written work plan for the collection s/he plans to process. This plan describes the individual series in the collection and recommends the appropriate level of arrangement and description for each series. At the same time, the processor will identify materials to be weeded, discarded, or transferred. Next, any processing problems present in the collection will be noted, and it should be noted whether the current organization or housing scheme is adversely affecting materials. Finally, the archivist concludes by estimating the time frame for completing intermediary as well as total processing activities and the amount of financial and staff resources the project will likely expend.
**Levels of Processing**

The most important of these steps is deciding on the level of processing a collection. It may seem easier to determine the overarching processing priorities than it is to plan how to process individual collections. However, it is essential that the processing archivist focus on establishing the level of processing for each collection, particularly those of great size, that pose major staffing and time commitments.

According to Fredric Miller, "It is important to understand that there is no requirement that all sets of records be processed to the same level of detail." Megan Floyd Desnoyers recommends that "the archivist should evaluate each collection and decide how far that particular collection needs to be taken along the arrangement, preservation, description and screening continua." Established guidelines indicate which collections might receive more careful processing than other collections. In assessing these needs, the processing archivist must consider the physical condition of the collection, the obligations to donors and researchers, and any legislation germane to the collection itself. The processing program extends beyond the selection of records and ensures that activities are carried out in a logical order.

Assignment of levels of processing must be made during the accessioning process. Decisions are based on available resources, possible uses of the material, and the nature of the records themselves. Levels of processing include:

- **Level 1:** Appropriate for a collection that needs minimal processing, usually established at the time a collection is acquired. No arrangement is performed, and description will consist entirely of title, approximate size, rough span of dates, and list or summary of types of materials found in the collection. This could be accompanied by names of prominent correspondents, principal writings, or a list of significant subjects addressed. Other options include a preliminary inventory as well as a catalog record in lieu of a finding aid.

- **Level 2:** This level is appropriate for very large collections such as organizational records. Collections may include large series of the same document types that need little detail or elaboration, such as minutes or newspaper clippings. At this level, materials are sorted into series or by form of material (correspondence, writings, personal papers, photographs, etc.) and listed at box level. Included is a summary type finding aid with a container list to the box level, bound volume, or microfilm reel. The scope and contents section of the finding aid briefly summarizes the subject content of the materials in lieu of elaboration in the container list.

- **Level 3:** This level is reserved for collections that are of particularly high historical value, will have heavy research use, and/or will have a great deal of research interest. Collections are sorted and arranged by series and subseries. At this stage processing includes completely reboxing and refoldering materials according to archival holdings maintenance standards. Papers within folders are properly arranged, and the collection is described at the box and folder level in a completed finding aid.
• **Level 4:** This level is reserved for collections of rare documents and collections of very few items. This is a calendar- or item-level control. An exceptional item or near-item level of folding and description is used occasionally in cases where the need for extreme security or other considerations of access and retrieval necessitates such control. For most large collections, processing to level 2 or level 3 is the most practical choice. Level 4 is rarely a viable option for sizeable collections.

**Preservation Considerations**

The processing archivist must not conduct arrangement and description without addressing the preservation or conservation needs of the collection. Archivists managing the preservation needs of their collections always come face-to-face with some basic obstacles, often caused by the poor conditions in which the materials were stored prior to donation. The chief preservation obstacles encountered by archivists are exposure to dust and mold. Boxes arrive at repositories having been stored in attics, basements, or warehouses, which lack proper environmental controls, regular maintenance, and housekeeping. Most collections also typically include newspaper clippings and deteriorating photocopies that will require reformatting.

"All collections should be evaluated to determine their need for protection from their containers, from self harm or destruction (such as from deteriorating chemicals or metal in, on, or near the documents), and from damage, danger, or theft from users." Preservation activity should take place during the actual processing of any collection. The processing archivist will determine how far to take the preservation activity, either basic holdings maintenance (refolding, reboxing, preservation photocopying) to more extensive work on the materials (reformatting to microfilm or reformatting from VHS to beta tapes).

Once an archivist has cleared the standard preservation obstacles associated with processing, s/he is free to concentrate on defining and describing records in ways that make their effective use possible and that actively encourages their use. These goals can be accomplished by considering the appropriate level of control and description given available time and resources.

**Physical Arrangement and Description**

After completing the preliminaries of selection and appraisal, accessioning, preliminary inventory, and processing proposal, and determining the level of processing, the archivist can proceed with the physical arrangement of the collection.

Seven critical stages of processing allow archivists to gain intellectual and physical control over a large collection: background research, preliminary inventory of records with preliminary groupings, identification of series and arrangement, review for weeding and sampling, physical arrangement and basic level of preservation, the preparation of the finding aid, and the creation of a catalog record. When conducting background research, it is very useful to create a chronology or history of the individual or organiza-
tion, including a list of staff and the positions they held, or officers and the offices they held.

Preliminary inventories help provide an overview of the collection. This inventory can go down to the box level and include the type of material (format), the organization of records, the broad subject area covered, an inclusive date span, and an estimate of work to be achieved.

In the course of completing the preliminary inventory, the materials are examined closely to determine if there is an existing pattern of arrangement and series. Separating groups of records into series and subseries will establish greater control of a collection.

Records are next reviewed for possible weeding and sampling. By removing irrelevant and low-value records from the collection, the archivist refines the collection into one that is concentrated with rich information and value and conserves valuable storage space. This winnowing of records can be done using qualitative (selective) or quantitative (statistical) sampling techniques. The amount of work required is largely dependent upon the order of the records, as well as on the level of processing decided for each collection.

If the original order is discernible and the records have been kept according to that order, then the task of refolding and reboxing is quite straightforward. If the original order is discernible and there are minor corrections that need to be accomplished (such as correcting alphabetical errors and replacing misplaced folders), this, too, is a reasonably simple task. However, if the original order is not discernible, a much larger commitment of time is needed in order to make the collection usable by researchers. The work plan developed earlier takes the state of the records into account when estimating the time needed to complete a project.

Figure 2: Processing Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCESSIONING:</th>
<th>DESCRIPTIVE ACTIONS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Assign an accession number</em></td>
<td><em>Item removed from frame</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Create entry in accession database</em></td>
<td><em>Oversized materials rehoused</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prepare Donor/Collection folder</em></td>
<td><em>Books listed and cataloged</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRELIMINARY INVENTORY:</strong></td>
<td><em>Boxes labeled</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Develop preliminary inventory</em></td>
<td><em>Boxes shelved</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Label containers with accession number and name of collection</em></td>
<td><em>Location guide updated</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL ARRANGEMENT ACTIONS:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Basic preservation (surface cleaning, etc.)</em></td>
<td><em>Described to what level (collection, box, folder, item)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Boxes replaced with lignin-free boxes</em></td>
<td><em>Draft finding aid in EAD</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Folders replaced with lignin-free folders</em></td>
<td><em>Revisions completed for finding aid</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Folders stamped and labeled in pencil</em></td>
<td><em>EAD document converted to HTML and linked to web page</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Materials mended or repaired</em></td>
<td><em>Hard copy of finding aid placed in reference room binder</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fragile materials resleeved/encapsulated</em></td>
<td><em>Draft MARC record created</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fasteners removed and replaced</em></td>
<td><em>MARC record input into Voyager and reviewed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Duplicates removed (note if they were transferred or destroyed)</em></td>
<td><em>MARC record entered into OCLC</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Photocopied all clippings, thermo-fax, etc. onto cotton fiber paper</em></td>
<td><em>Catalog Department uploaded MARC record into OCLC</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A processing checklist (figure 2) outlines basic procedures performed on an individual collection, including basic holdings maintenance actions. This inventory is very useful, especially when working with the sheer volume of large collections, with keeping up with what has been completed on any given project. A checklist must be completed for every processed collection. The number of items checked off would depend on the level of processing chosen for that collection.

Although this work can sometimes seem solitary, there are opportunities for collaboration. Paraprofessionals and student assistants can accomplish many basic tasks, such as reboxing, refoldering, labeling folders, and minor preservation work. Training student assistants in routine tasks offers the processing archivist the opportunity to develop his or her supervisory skills.

Once the archivist finishes the physical arrangement of the materials, s/he will begin to describe the collection. Description typically includes creating a finding aid and a catalog record. Many repositories now have the capability of encoding finding aids using Encoded Archival Description (EAD) and mounting them on the Web. These searchable, readily accessible aids offer maximum accessibility to potential researchers. A copy of the finding aid will also be placed in the reference room for on-site users and for those who do not have Web access.

**Processing Living Collections**

A significant challenge in processing large collections is managing collections that grow in size as donors continue adding materials to their original deposits. Known as "living collections," these collections often emanate from organizations whose operation is ongoing (for example, university and organizational records). When processing such collections, the goal will be to present a clear inventory to users.

Intellectual arrangement does not have to mirror the physical arrangement. The series title, not the box number, can be the primary organizing principle of the inventories. Terry Eastwood suggests two rules of arrangement when dealing with these types of collections. "The need to separate physical and administrative control [when dealing with accruals] is incontestable ... the first rule of arrangement is separate physical and administrative control from intellectual control. ... the second rule of arrangement, closely related to the first, is to identify each component of an accession with the aggregation or aggregations to which it belongs." 32

Thus, the goal is to leave living collections unintegrated physically, but to bring them together intellectually. So a finding aid may well look something like:

**Minutes, 1900–1985**

- 1900–1944
- 1945–1952
- 1953–1985

**Box 1**

**Minutes, 1900–1945**

- Box
- 1
- 56
- 101

**Box 56**

**Box 101**
This format is adaptable to EAD and it accommodates series descriptions. It also means that the finding aids can be edited, reprinted, and reposted to the Web when new accessions come in, at a fraction of the work of physically reorganizing the collection every time.

One predicament with this approach is that, in order to review all the parts of one series, as in the above example, a patron will need to examine multiple boxes instead of just one. Nevertheless, if each accrual is processed separately, there is usually insufficient staff to physically reorganize each addition, ultimately resulting in the request of multiple boxes. By applying the intellectual organizational scheme, users can easily see how many years of minutes are available.

The more serious difficulty with intellectual, not physical, integration is that the finding aid is no longer a true box list. This may cause challenges in locating the total contents of each box. To alleviate this potential problem, the archivist can maintain a box list separately, just as library shelf lists were separate from the card catalog.33

Conclusion

Managing the processing of large collections can be daunting, but sizeable collections need not intimidate a repository if it develops and adheres to well-planned and integrated processing operations. The planning process offers a cumulative benefit. Each part of the continuum, from selection and appraisal to arranging and describing, is strengthened with sound planning. With a little imagination, compromise, and collaboration, processing can become another strong link in the chain of archival activity. Using sound principles and procedures, the management of processing becomes the strongest link of all.

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NOTES


10. Hunter, 47.


17. Wagner, 37.


22. Desnoyers, 8.

23. Desnoyers, 8.

24. Miller, 45.

25. These levels are based on those first established by Holmes (see note 5).

26. Miller, 46.

27. “Archives and Manuscripts: Processing Manual”


31. Hunter, 64–68.

32. Eastwood, 97.

33. Mark Greene, “Living Collections,” 11 July 2000, personal E-mail to author.